

Belgian Surrealism and Flemish Nationalism

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THB's Man in Belgium, Frank Gerits, gives us the low-down on the consequences of the local election results for Belgium.....

On 14 October 2012 Belgium had its local elections. New city councils and mayors were elected with one of the biggest winners being the New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie NVA). Bart de Wever, the party leader, became the Mayor of Antwerp, Europe's second biggest port city. This nationalist party – which argues that Belgium will evaporate with an independent Flanders as the result – seems to have become a major political force. With almost 27.8% of the votes in the latest federal elections of 2010, they are now also firmly rooted locally, something which is considered to be essential for long term political survival in Belgium.

There is an interesting parallel with the Netherlands, because the rise of the NVA has reduced the racist Flemish Party, Vlaams Belang, to an insignificant factor in Belgian political life. As in the Netherlands, the economic crisis has actually resulted in throwing overboard the radical-racist alternatives and voters have rewarded parties which were responsible for a failed government coalition: The VVD in the Netherlands, the NVA in Belgium.

It is therefore understandable that [the BBC could not really make sense of this](#), instead placing the victory of the NVA in a larger European context where “there have been growing calls for independence from nationalists in Catalonia in Spain and Scotland in the United Kingdom, as the Eurozone crisis tests loyalties across the European Union.” Moreover, during his victory speech De Wever called on the Belgian prime minister to start negotiations about a new “confederation” structure

for Belgium, a conscious choice to push the larger ideological programme of the party. How can we understand this new victory of a party that demands the end of Belgium? The answer is complicated, and as always in Belgium a bit surreal.

A first answer to this question lies in the history of Flemish nationalism. While analysts outside of Belgium consider the NVA's victory as a temporary radical victory that has been brought about by the economic crisis, it does not explain why the NVA was already successful in 2010 when the crisis was still relatively mild in Belgium. What is often forgotten is the fact that the NVA's predecessor, the 'Union of the People' (Volksunie VU-ID) already participated in three Belgian government coalitions (1977-1978 Tindemans II, Vanden Boeynants II 1978-1979, and Geens I 1981-1985). History has shown that it is possible to swear allegiance to King and Country as a member of parliament, while actually rejecting that same country in the party platform. Voting for the NVA is not all that new or radical - on the contrary, it is part of Belgian history, where enthusiasm about Flemish independence has risen and waned.

Secondly, even though the NVA made a lot of progress in the local elections, these contests were driven by local dynamics. Other parties rightly emphasised that the elections could not be read as a national indication. In Ghent, for instance, the immensely popular mayor Daniël Termont gained an absolute majority with his socialist-green coalition. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that while the NVA did not win in every city, by its very presence it did make a lot of shifts possible. In cities all across Flanders, old majorities and mayors who had been governing cities for decades have been replaced by new coalitions, because the emergence of the NVA across the political landscape gave older parties the possibility to rethink coalition strategies. In Kortrijk, for instance, the liberal party forged a new majority with the NVA, even though the sitting mayor won the most votes.

Thirdly, NVA voters generally do not want the end of Belgium. Fears of secession have been around since 1830, since the very day the country was created in the aftermath of the Belgian revolution. What's more, there is nothing more quintessentially Belgian than stating that you don't care if the country keeps on existing or not, something that seems to be incomprehensible for foreign journalist and analysts. The NVA is successful because they have been able to package their message of Flemish independence within a liberal economic agenda, something that sells well with the Flemish voting public. Furthermore, since their victory in 2010, the NVA's message that the Belgian federal model is outmoded and the actual cause for not attaining economic progress has convinced more and more voters. These voters want a 'new' Belgium, but what this means has remained up till now very vague.

What will the future bring?

Will the NVA continue to be successful? The answer to that question depends on its ability to come to terms with its new position. If it wants to become a major political force in Belgium, rather than just a small nationalist party, it will have to play the game the Belgian way, and that means making compromises. However, this seems highly unlikely, because their entire program is exactly based on the belief that the typically Belgian compromises that have always been forged are profoundly inefficient and have led to an unstable situation.

While I was more comfortable predicting the end of Wilders, I am not entirely sure with the NVA. The sitting government is unable to market itself, something that is unavoidable in times of economic crisis. In the meantime the NVA has all the manoeuvring space it wants to criticise the Belgian compromise system. This in spite of the fact that it is part of the Flemish government, which is confronted with its own problems, inefficiencies and little scandals, hardly supporting the NVA's claim that the 'Flemish policy level is the better policy level'.

Nonetheless, the NVA's message of institutional reform remains an appealing one, in part because the restructuring of the Belgian house has been the most important way in which Belgium has solved its socio-economic and cultural problems.

So in the end, what might be seen as an hardening of ideological positions with possibly disastrous consequences on the outside, might just be just another step on the long road of Belgian reinventiveness. The elections of 2014 will be the real moment of truth in Belgium when federal, regional and European elections will all be held at the same time.

While that might become the endpoint of a complex and surreal political system, it still seems highly unlikely. After all, even the recent local elections had a surreal feeling. Only a year ago, when on 6 December 2011 a new government was sworn in after 541 days of negotiations, Belgian political life seemed to be dead and the biggest loser was Belgian democracy itself. People were supposedly sick of politics, and it would be difficult to keep the voting public interested.

Yet on Sunday 14 October, [more viewers and internet users than ever before](#) tuned in to follow their elections, according to the national broadcast association. In other words – never count out Belgian resourcefulness.

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